65p

THE Unexplained

MYSTERIES OF MIND SPACE & TIME

142

The angels of Mons
Modern witchcraft exposed
Legend of Prester John
Isa Northage-medium
Neanderthals today?

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THE Unexplained
MYSTERIES OF MIND SPACE & TIME

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In next week's issue
Bowmen, angels, Joan of Arc and St Michael were all reported as giving supernatural aid to the Allies in 1914 – but did they? In **Angels of Mons** we unravel the truth behind the legends. There have always been witches, but how old is organised witchcraft? In **Occult revival** we assess the beliefs and aims of witches of yesterday and today. Fyvie Castle in Scotland labours under an ancient curse and is haunted by a 'Green Ladye' who carved her name in stone; **Great hauntings** tells the story. Extraordinary details about the death of young **Edgar Vandy** and his last invention emerged from his brothers' sittings with mediums – but were the Vandys being duped? And in **UFO cover up** we investigate the bizarre inconsistencies in official attitudes to UFOs throughout the world.
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Father of witchcraft

Are today's witches practising an ancient tradition that, as they often claim, dates back to medieval times – or are they heirs to a relatively new set of beliefs? FRANK SMYTH investigates the roots of modern witchcraft and the occult revival

Right: a 16th-century illustration by Hans Baldung depicts the witches' sabbat of popular medieval imagination. Here a young witch is being 'flown' to the unholy meeting assisted by an old hag

Below: modern witches, members of the Church of Wicca in Amarillo, Texas, USA, prepare candles for a healing session

Below left: Gerald Gardner as a boy. He came from a family of eccentrics and appears to have continued their tradition

PERHAPS ONE OF THE ODDEST and most enduring social phenomena of the 1960s and 1970s was the so-called 'occult explosion'. Faced with wars, civil strife, growing unemployment and the ever present shadow of nuclear war, the young looked towards Eastern mysticism, astrology, alchemy, and even visitors from outer space, for solace.

For many, witchcraft – the 'Old Religion' as they termed it – provided the answers. Of those who practise it not a few believe they are involved in what was once the universal religion of Stone Age Man. They point out that the very word stems from the Old English 'wicca' – wise – and the general belief is that the ancient wisdom of the witches, driven underground by persecution during the medieval period, nevertheless endured, springing safely to full bloom again when the last Witchcraft Act of 1735 was repealed in 1951 to be replaced with the Fraudulent Mediums Act.

Like all other religious movements, the witchcraft revival has its schisms and breakaway groups, but their basic beliefs and rituals are shared. They see traditional witchcraft as having concerned the world's turning; the growing and ripening of corn; the fertility of animals. Its magic was of the 'white' variety, used to heal and strengthen believers, since it was said that any evil spell would rebound three times on its user. 'Covens' meeting at 'sabbats' were not

Devil-worshipping groups blasphemously parodying the Christian mass, but were simply paying ritual homage, with wine, dancing and occasional sexual activity, to the ancient gods and goddesses: Osiris and Isis, Pan and Diana, Cernunnos and Arianrod.

By the early 1980s such proselytising had attracted an estimated 100,000 followers in Britain and the United States alone – though the secrecy that surrounds many groups within the movement makes headcounting difficult.

The tenets of modern witchcraft are purported to be enshrined in a common manual known as the 'Book of Shadows'. It is claimed that through this book, copied secretly 'in their own hand of write' by successive coven priests and priestesses, the ancient cult has survived for over a thousand years.

One of the main perpetrators of this line of thought was a retired British customs officer named Gerald Brousseau Gardner. The existence of the 'Book of Shadows' was first revealed in his writings. The question is did he discover an hereditary cult in Britain that was older than Christianity, or did he invent much of witchcraft as it is practised today?

Odd relations

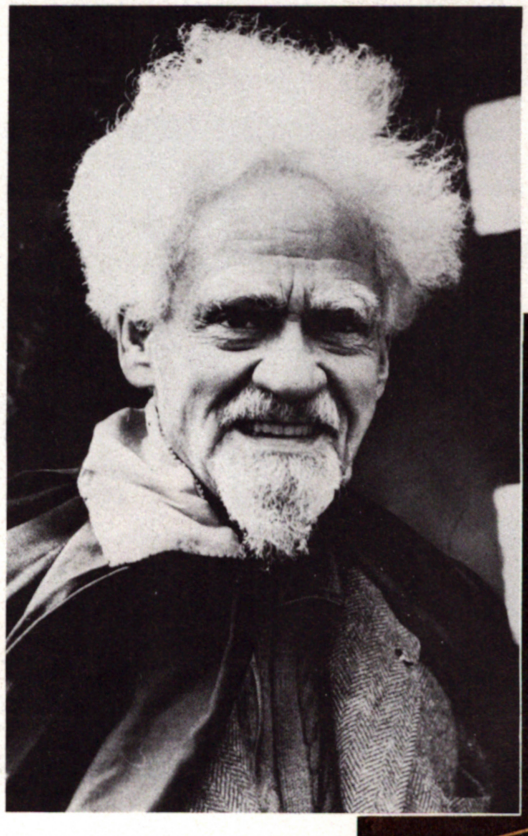
Gardner was born on 13 June 1884, at Great Crosby, Lancashire, the son of a wealthy timber merchant. The entire family were known as eccentrics to the locals; Gerald's elder brother seems to have had a dislike of nature and spent much of his time indoors, shooting small birds from an upper storey window with a heavy calibre rifle. Uncle Joe Gardner, who lived across the road, was a religious maniac who loathed Catholicism, published anti-papist tracts, and built churches for both the Methodists and the Anglicans, attending services at each establishment in turn. William Gardner, Gerald's father, was perhaps the oddest of all; when caught in a shower of rain, it was his habit to take off his clothes, fold them neatly, and sit naked upon them until the weather had cleared.

Gerald Gardner lived in these surroundings until he was seven, then he began spending winters abroad with an Irish nannie, Josephine McCombie. For nine years they travelled together in the Canary Islands, North Africa and the Middle East. In 1900 Josephine married a tea planter from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Gerald accompanied the newly-weds to Colombo where, for the next 36 years, he made his living as a rubber planter and colonial customs officer. He had an eclectic nature and by the time he came to return to England in 1936 he had become an amateur archaeologist expert in edged weapons, and a writer, though his existing letters and manuscripts show him to have been nearly dyslexic. He had also developed an interest in mysticism, the occult and Western Spiritualism, which was shared by his wife Donna, whom he had married while on leave in England in 1927.

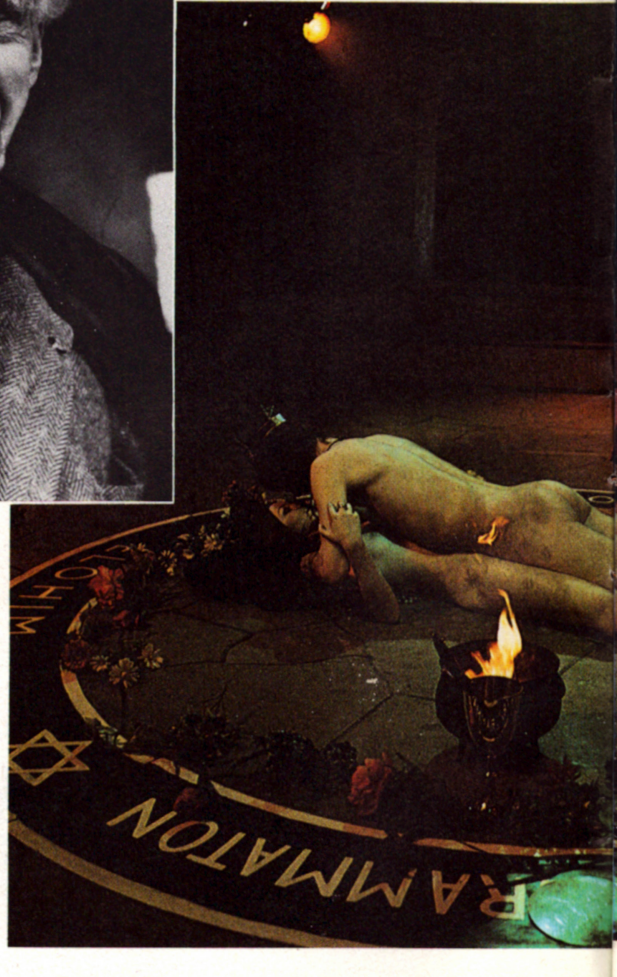
Once back in England, Gardner joined the highly respectable British Folklore Society, eventually becoming a member of the governing council, and periodically contributing to the society's journal *Folklore*.

But alongside his life of fringe academicism ran a parallel, more clandestine existence. In 1939 he claimed to have met an elderly woman whom he named 'Dorothy' or 'Daffo'. He maintained she was the high priestess of the last remaining coven in Britain, and she was willing to initiate Gardner into her group.

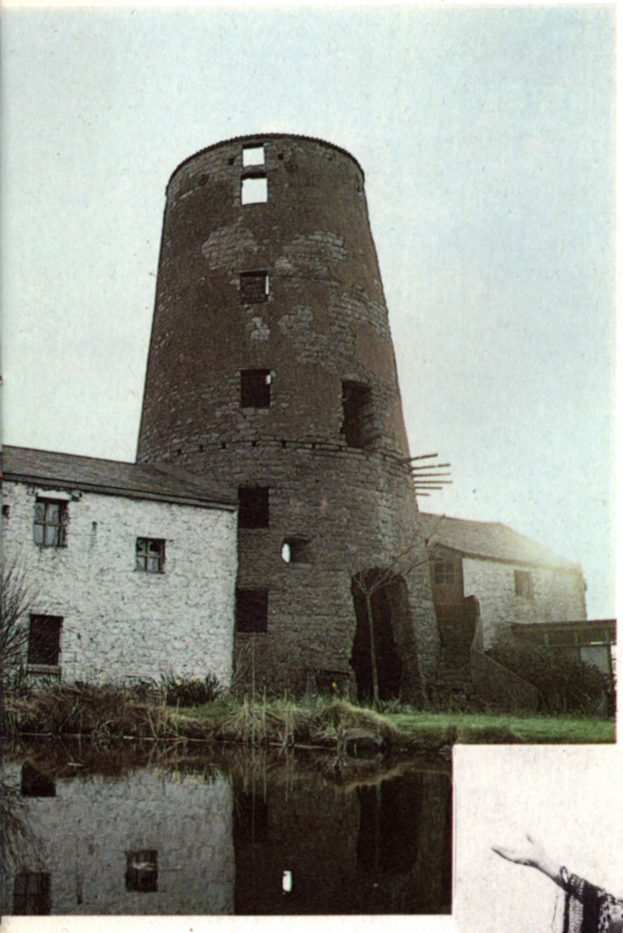
It was under her tutelage that Gardner apparently learned of the Book of Shadows. He copied it out by hand as tradition demanded he should do. He also claimed to have learned how the witches of the New Forest descended by a kind of 'apostolic succession' from the witches of the Middle Ages and beyond. Gardner declared they



Above: Gerald Gardner, the man whose writings, purportedly based on ancient witchcraft practices, started the occult revival in the 1960s



Right: modern witches in action. Nudity, copulation and voyeurism – Gardner was inordinately fond of each – are part of the rituals in many of today's covens



With the proceeds from his books Gardner bought a ruined windmill and outbuildings (left, the property in 1983) at Castledown, Isle of Man, to house his museum, which exhibited witchcraft 'relics' purchased from the collector Cecil H. Williamson. An illustration (right) advertising the museum may have been drawn by Gardner himself. When he died, his High Priestess, Mrs Monique Wilson (below), inherited the Castledown property

were witches dedicated to the power of good, despite the persecution they had suffered throughout history, most notably during the witch trials of the medieval period. During the Napoleonic wars they had helped to repel a French invasion, and they were to perform a similar service during the Second World War against Hitler – this, at least, is how Gardner told it.

They performed their dancing rituals in the nude, indulged in ritual bondage and mild flagellation, and at major ceremonies ('Esbats') they undertook the 'Great Rite': sexual intercourse between the High Priestess and Priest in full view of the assembled coven. They appealed to Gerald Gardner enormously.

In 1949, according to his own account, Dorothy gave Gardner permission to reveal, if a trifle obliquely, some of the secrets of the 'Wicca' in a novel entitled *High magick's aid*. Two further, more specific, books were to be published with the repeal of the Witchcraft Act. Both caused a minor sensation in the press, and overnight Gardner became notorious. He bought a ruined windmill at Castledown in the Isle of Man, purchased a number of witchcraft 'relics' and set up a witchcraft museum and a local coven of his own. In 1960 he began travelling again. He died on 12 February 1964 while on a cruise along the North African coast.

The publication of his will showed that he died a rich man. His museum and cottage went to his High Priestess Mrs Monique Wilson and her husband, and the rest was divided between a few remaining relatives and 'initiates' into the coven.

The man behind the magic

On the surface Gardner appears to have been an academic dilettante – no more outrageous than many a colonial character from the dying days of the British Empire. Unfortunately there is clear evidence that he was also a fraud of a very shallow kind.

The membership list of the Folklore Society for November 1950 ascribes him as holding the degrees of Master of Arts and Doctor of Philosophy. In the first edition of the *Authors' and writers' who's who* (1963) he appears to have also acquired a Doctorate of Literature, and it states he was 'privately educated'. In fact, he admitted to Jack Bracelin, one of his followers who wrote a biography of him in 1960, that he taught himself

to read. The suggestion is that he used *Strand Magazine* as his primer during his first sojourn abroad. There is no record of his having either attended a university or been awarded an honorary degree.

According to Francis King and Isobel Sutherland in their book *The rebirth of magic* Gardner was friendly with J. S. M. Ward, a self-appointed abbot who had been involved in several bogus universities. The chances are that it was from him that Gardner acquired his various doctorates.

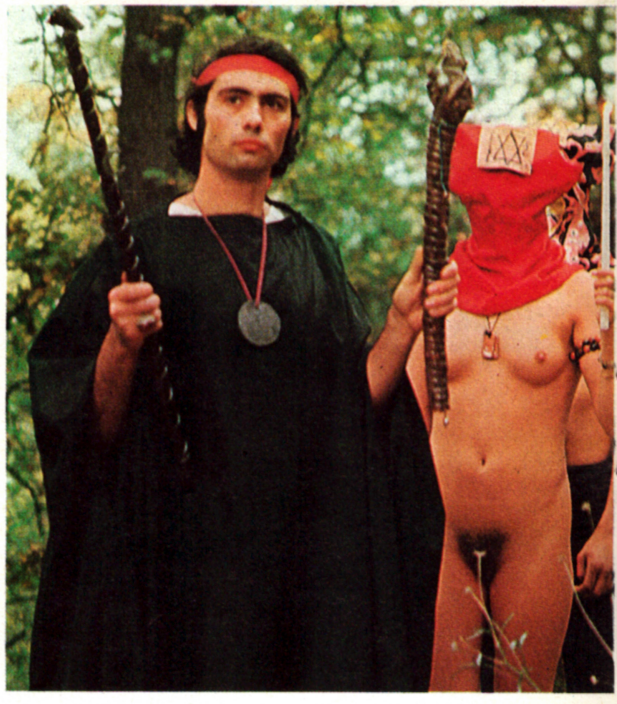
Nor were his writings unimpeachable. It is perhaps significant that, though he was a member of its council for 18 years, the Folklore Society published no obituary of him in its journal. Miss Christina Hole, a leading British folklorist and author, and editor of *Folklore*, wrote to the present author in 1969 to explain:

> Dr [*sic*] Gardner had a very curious personality. It did not inspire confidence – at least not in me, nor in a number of people interested in witchcraft and kindred matters. His theories were in themselves somewhat peculiar. I remember a meeting when the composition of the Council for the following year was discussed, and the question raised as to whether his presence . . . was really advantageous to the Society. . . . Nothing was done about it, and his name was allowed to go forward as before but the doubt was clearly felt and expressed.

In 1954 Stewart Sanderson, director of the Institute of Dialect and Folk-Life Studies at Leeds University, was at an international conference on maritime folklore at which Gardner was giving a paper. His thesis, on the development of the Manx fishing craft, appeared on the surface to be a superb piece of research. However, Sanderson thought it rather odd that the article gave no reference or acknowledgements to earlier studies on the subject. As he recalls: 'It was in fact a scissors and paste job, with a sprinkling of folklore beliefs at the end, based on Basil and Eleanor Megaw's "The development of the Manx fishing craft" in the *Proceedings* of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society.'

Gardner had not based his entire paper on the Megaws' work but had had the good grace to pepper it with material from another article that had appeared in *Mariner's Mirror* in April 1941.

If he was willing or reckless enough to risk exposure on such well-documented subjects, how far can his testimony be trusted on the subject of the 'Wicca'?



Right: satanic goings-on in Provence, France. Heading the procession is the Black Magus, behind him are two female initiates. The sado-masochistic overtones of this black magic group are also found in some covens practising white magic, but, whereas the latter serve the 'forces of light', the former pays homage to the 'forces of darkness'

Alex Sanders (left) and his then wife Maxine, 'King and Queen of the Witches', with High Priest Paul King. Sanders started his own cult based on rituals he claimed had been passed on to him by his grandmother. However, there is a marked similarity between the Alexandrian and the Gardnerian brand of witchcraft, and it seems likely that Sanders picked up most of his ideas from Gardner's 'Book of Shadows'

Gardner's sources

The actual rituals, beliefs and text of the Book of Shadows that Gardner claimed were handed on to him by Dorothy appeared in full several times in the 1970s. And on examination the rituals described appear to be very much a 'scissors and paste job'.

Their most immediate source is the work of Dr Margaret Murray. She was the first to propound the theory in the 1940s that witchcraft was an organised underground religion. A distinguished professor of Egyptology, Dr Murray's witchcraft theories have nevertheless been squarely refuted by medieval and anthropological scholars.

Other sources are not difficult to find. Gardner drew on Charles Leland's *Aradia* (1897), De Givry's *Witchcraft, magic and alchemy*, which appeared in its first English translation in 1931, and on Aleister Crowley's *Book of the law* (see page 2084). S. L. MacGregor Mathers's edition of *The*

Right: a heart, nails and the medieval witch's bottle in which they were found. It is thought that the objects were used to reverse death spells. Gardnerian witches dabble in white magic only, believing that any evil spell will rebound with triple strength on its users

greater key of Solomon, a 15th-century magical grimoire (handbook of ritual magic), was also grist to the Gardner mill. In addition, many of the rituals of the Order of the Golden Dawn, co-founded by Mathers in 1888, found their way into Gardner's opus; even a rustic-sounding verse by Rudyard Kipling was topped, tailed and slightly altered to fit his August Eve rite.

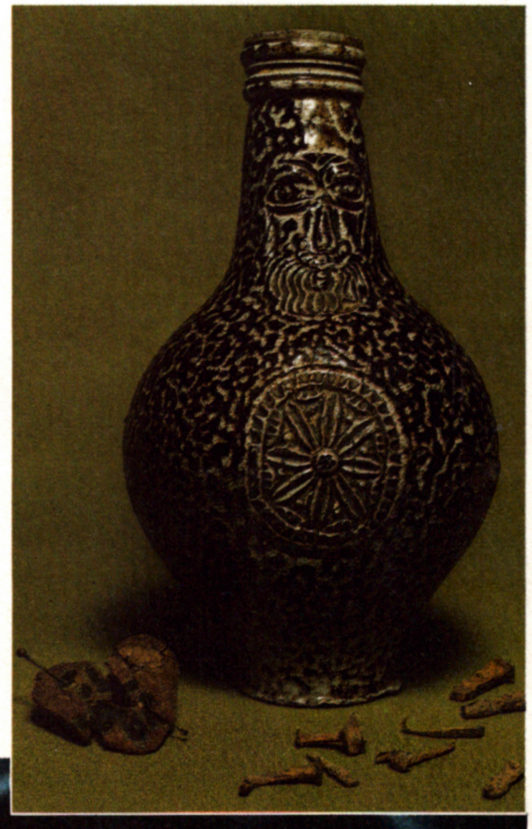
In short, Gardner's Book of Shadows was a fake with many of the statements contained therein being historically inaccurate. Take, for example, his suggestion that Dorothy and her followers believed in reincarnation. Commitment to such a doctrine immediately places the coven very firmly in the post 1870s, since in the medieval period the concept of reincarnation did not exist, except in the modified form of a belief in the transmigration of souls.

More importantly, there is no trace of witchcraft, of the type condemned during the Middle Ages, ever having been an organised practice at all. The great witch hunts that raged throughout Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries cannot be taken as evidence that a diabolical religion opposed to Christianity existed. Such a notion was a fantasy born in the minds of the late medieval inquisitors who viewed any practices existing outside the strict framework of Christianity as Devil worship. Men who masterminded the purges did so from confused beliefs both about the dualist heresies of such groups as the Manichees and the Cathars and about ritual magic – though invariably this was practised by individuals.

Of course, once the purges got under way many witches came forward and confessed to having 'flown' to the Sabbath on broomsticks. Often they made their 'confessions' under torture. And when they came forward of their own volition, incriminating themselves and often neighbours too, they were simply responding to the climate that the inquisitors had created with all their talk of devils and demons.

However, the interesting point about Gardner's 'Wicca' is that, despite its fraudulent beginnings, it has grown under the hands of sincere, if misguided, believers to be a viable religious movement, which seems to fulfil deep psychological needs that the more orthodox churches have failed to supply.

On page 2854: do Gardner's followers possess any real powers?



In 1936 Gardner published a pamphlet on the wavy-edged Malaysian *Kris*, or dagger (right), which was well-received by folklorists, and in March 1939 he joined the British Folklore Society. He marked the occasion of his inauguration with an address on the subject of a box of 'witch relics', alleged to have belonged to Matthew Hopkins, the 17th-century 'Witchfinder General'

Patriotic Britons in the First World War, convinced that their cause was a righteous one, eagerly seized on news that their army had received supernatural aid from ghostly archers, angels – even St George himself. MELVIN HARRIS traces the rumour

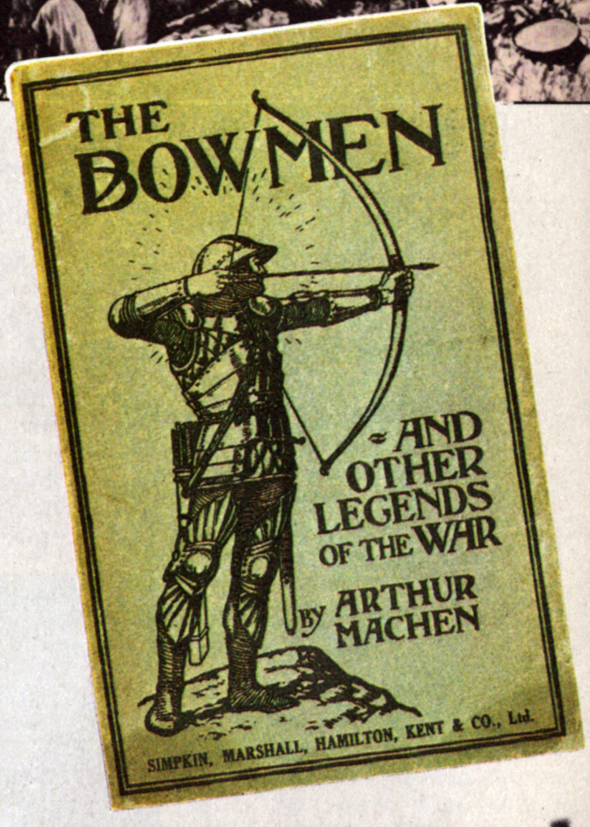
The angels take a bow

THE FIRST MAJOR BATTLE of the First World War was fought in August 1914 in Flanders. There, at Mons, the British troops held back a numerically superior German force and fought with an amazing ferocity. But in the end the pressure of numbers became too great and, in order to avoid being trapped, the British were instructed to make an orderly withdrawal. And they did this successfully, even though they suffered heavy losses.

There were two main reasons why the British defeat was not more costly. In the first place, there was the devastating marksmanship of the riflemen. In fact, their rapid-fire techniques were so spectacular that at times the Germans imagined they were facing machine-gunners. Second, every soldier carried a special entrenching tool in his haversack. With this tool, protective ramparts of earth could be thrown up in a few minutes: even in exposed places the troops could shield themselves and then fight back. So there was nothing in any way uncanny about the whole episode. But later an uncanny 'explanation' crept in.

It began with a short story by Arthur Machen called *The bowmen*. It was printed in the afternoon and evening editions of the London *Evening News* on 29 September 1914.

The story opens with the description of a large-scale retreat by the British Expeditionary Force. Then, in the heat of battle,



Ghostly archers repel the advancing Germans (above), saving the hard-pressed British at a critical moment. The rumour of the visions was so widespread by Christmas 1915 that *The Illustrated London News* dignified it with this illustration. The story stimulated the fervour of people on the 'home front' and compensated to some degree for the grim truth of Mons – that it was a defeat for the British that ended in retreat (below)

Left: the first mention of supernatural aid to the British at Mons came in Arthur Machen's short story *The bowmen*. Popular rumours soon replaced the bowmen with angels, headed by St George

Right: the fighting men are backed by an angel on this picture postcard sent from the front. The British public was assured of God's aid – even before the legend of the angels gave that aid tangible form

one of the soldiers remembers a restaurant he used to visit. He recalls the blue and white plates with their pictures of St George. And he shouts out the motto that ran round the edge of the plates, *Adsit Anglis Sanctus Georgius* (St George help the English).

Suddenly the battlefield is shaken as thousands of voices call out the name of St George. And there facing the Germans stands a long, shining line of Agincourt archers. Then the air is dark with arrows, which cut down the advancing enemy troops – and the day is saved. Ten thousand dead Germans lie scattered on the battlefield, but not one of them bears a single wound!

That tale was not one of Machen's best. And he, for one, thought it would soon be forgotten. But within a few days, Machen received letters from the editors of *The Occult Review* and the magazine *Light*. And they asked whether the tale had *any* foundation in fact. They were, naturally, told that it was just a piece of imaginative writing.

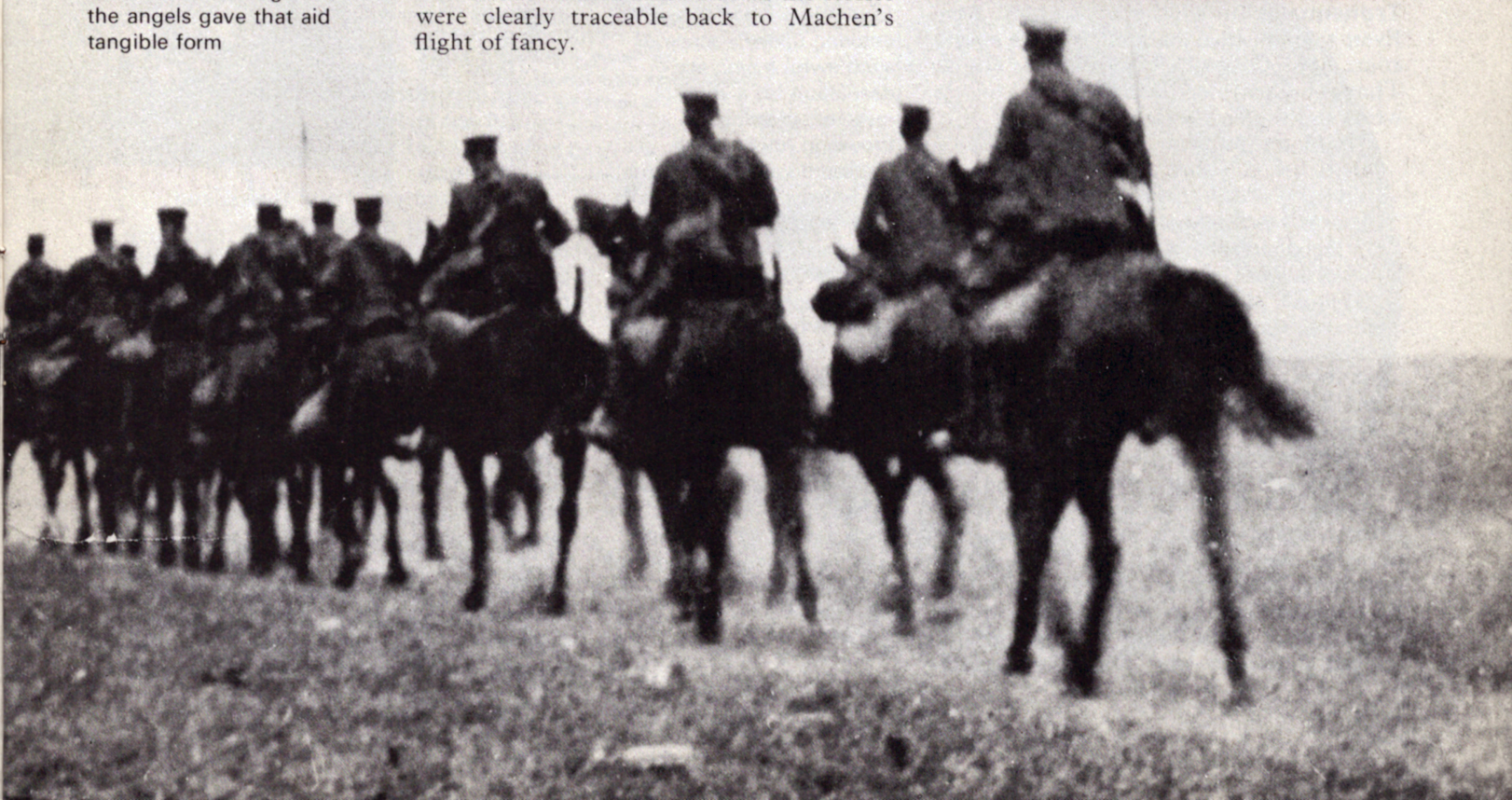
In the following months various parish magazines wrote in for permission to reprint the story. The editor of the *Evening News* said 'yes' to every one of them – he had no idea that the story was being misused.

When one of these parish magazines ran out of copies, the vicar wrote direct to Machen and said that he would like to re-issue *The bowmen* as a pamphlet. He asked Machen to write a short introduction, giving the exact authorities for the story. Machen wrote back to say that there were no authorities, since the story was pure invention. But the vicar refused to believe him and insisted that the story *must be true*. . . . It was then that Machen realised that he had 'succeeded unwittingly, in the art of deceit'.

Very soon variations of the tale were being told as 'established fact'. But all the stories were clearly traceable back to Machen's flight of fancy.

Take the version published by the Roman Catholic paper the *Universe* in its issue of 30 April 1915. This was a second-hand account said to be based on a letter from a Catholic officer at the front. This letter claimed that:

> A party of about 30 men and an officer was cut off in a trench, when the officer said to his men, 'Look here; we must either stay here and be caught like rats in a trap, or make a sortie against the enemy.' . . . The men all agreed with him, and with a yell of 'St George for



England!' they dashed out into the open. The officer tells how, as they ran on, he became aware of a large company of men with bows and arrows going along with them, and even leading them on against the enemy's trenches. . . . Afterwards when he was talking to a German prisoner, the man asked him who was the officer on the great white horse who led them? For although he was such a conspicuous figure, they had none of them been able to hit him. I must also add that the German dead appeared to have no wounds on them. . . .

The Protestant version was just as colourful. As told by the Rev. Fielding Ould of St Albans, it ran:

A sergeant in our army had frequented a house of the Young Men's Christian Association, and had seen there a picture of St George slaying the dragon. He had been deeply impressed by it, and when, at the front, he found himself in an advanced and rather isolated trench, he told the story of St George to his men. . . . When, shortly afterwards, a sudden charge of the grey-coated Germans in greatly superior numbers threatened the sergeant's trench, he cried, 'Remember St George for England!' to his men as they advanced to meet the foe. A few moments afterward the enemy hesitated, stopped and finally fled, leaving some prisoners in our hands. One of the latter, who seemed dazed and astonished, demanded to be told who were the horsemen in armour who led the charge. Surely they could not have been Belgians, dressed in such a way!

Transmutation of the bowmen

Even the Spiritualists had their own variation. Miss Callow, secretary of the Higher Thought Centre in Kensington, London, wrote to the *Weekly Despatch* to say:

An officer has sent . . . a detailed account of a vision that appeared to himself and others when fighting against fearful odds at Mons.

He plainly saw an apparition representing St George, the patron saint of England, the exact counterpart of a picture that hangs today in a London restaurant. So terrible was their plight at the time that the officer could not refrain from appealing to the vision to help them. Then, as if the enemy had also seen the apparition, the Germans abandoned their positions in precipitate terror.

After a while, though, some people grew unhappy with the bowmen. Perhaps they were too militant and too secular for comfort. So a transmutation began, and the shining archers were turned into shining angels – winged creatures who did not intervene aggressively but in an awe-inspiring way. A poem, *After Mons*, published in *Light* (15 May 1915), seems to mark this shift of emphasis. Its second verse read:

You saw, O friend, the forms, the light, the sheen?
Our foes, their horses, saw; they turned and fled,
As troops of silent angels filed between
Our broken ranks and theirs, and stilled our dread.

And so the bowmen were pushed into the background. The angels proved much more reassuring and acceptable. Even so, people were reluctant to give up all the glamour of Machen's tale, and St George managed to survive in many of the yarns that untiringly circulated.

From July 1915, angels were in season with a vengeance. Sheaves of articles appeared in the press – and so did a mass of heated correspondence. Many clergymen preached sermons using the angels as the central theme. Even Machen was swept up in the fervour. He was pressed to issue *The bowmen* in book form – tying it in with some extra stories of 'legends of the war' – and he obliged. He delivered three more fantastic

Arthur Machen's denial that there was any factual basis to *The bowmen* did not shake the conviction of authors determined to believe in the apparitions at Mons. Harold Begbie wrote a book (above) in which he sought to show that Machen's 'quite simple and pardonably egoistic explanation of the mystery' was erroneous. And he further reproved Machen for entering upon 'a scene of such awful havoc and desolation for a story of mystery', creating 'a thousand hopes and a thousand consolations' for the bereaved and then airily dismissing the legends 'in the tones of amusement'. Ralph Shirley, in a pamphlet (above right), surmised that Machen had drawn his theme from soldiers at the front by telepathy; the visions were real, he said, but 'clothed upon by the imagination of the beholder'. One soldier saw St George in golden armour, probably because he had 'seen him most recently on the back of a sovereign. . . .'

pieces – one of which was again taken to be true. But the best part of his slim book consisted of the 23 pages in which he explained how and why the legend had become confused with fact.

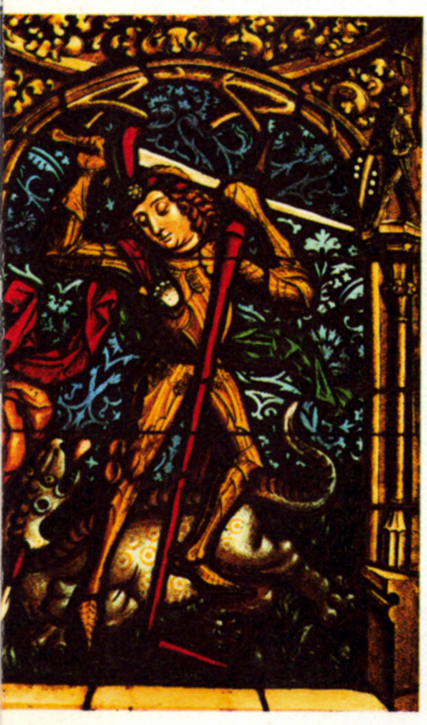
The bowmen – and other legends became a best-seller – 3000 copies a day were snapped up, and the book was translated into six languages. But the information in it did little to dampen people's ardour for the myth in its angelic version. For suddenly, the public were overwhelmed with testimony and 'evidence' *in favour* of the angels. Late in the day, certainly, but there it was, in glorious 'authoritative' print!

First in the field was Ralph Shirley, editor of *The Occult Review*. His pamphlet *The angel warriors at Mons* claimed to be 'an authentic record' including 'numerous confirmatory testimonies'. Then the Rev. Herbert Wood of Liverpool issued his *Wonderful works of God*, which recounted visions of angels. Other clergymen followed suit.

Below left: it is natural that St George, the patron saint of England, should figure in visions seen by English troops. Ironically, he is also revered in Germany, as this German church window shows

Below: angelic warriors lingered in the British imagination long after the Armistice. Here one appears in a nursery wall plaque

Bottom: St George adorns a plate made in 1908. Machen, with wry humour, imagined St George summoned to Mons by a soldier's recollection of his picture on a plate once seen in a vegetarian restaurant



After that, Harold Begbie intervened. He was an extremely popular writer of the time. He was also an ardent patriot and he felt the story was inspiring and had to be defended. So he waded in with a book entitled *On the side of the angels* – the weightiest defence of all. Begbie was furious with Machen's attempt to set the record straight. He even suggested that Machen may have picked up information about the angels direct from the battlefields – by telepathy!

One of the widely quoted testimonies was that of Miss Marrable, daughter of the well-known Canon Marrable. The copy distributed by the Rev. M. P. Gillson read:

> Last Sunday I met Miss Marrable and she told me she knew two officers both of whom had seen the Angels who saved their left wing from the Germans when they came right upon them during our retreat from Mons. They expected annihilation . . . when to their amazement the Germans stood like dazed men, never so much as touched their guns nor stirred until we had turned round and escaped. . . .
>
> The other man she met in London and asked him if he had heard the wonderful story of the Angels. He answered that he had seen them himself while he and his company were retreating. They heard the German cavalry tearing after them. They had made for a place . . . of safety, but before they could reach it the German cavalry were upon them, so they turned round to face the enemy expecting instant death when, to their wonder they saw between them and the enemy a whole troop of Angels, and the horses of the Germans turned round terrified . . . and tore away in all directions. . . .

This testimony convinced thousands. Miss Marrable's statements were used by the Rev. R. F. Horton in a famous sermon, often reprinted. Her claims were embodied in parish magazines, religious pamphlets and in Harold Begbie's book. It was understandable that this should be so – for they were the considered words of a 'lady of quality' from a committed Christian family.

On page 2846: shocking disclosures shake the evidence for the angels

Legends of the secret king

Rumours of a Christian king called Prester John, who ruled over a fabulous empire, haunted the imaginations of medieval European monarchs. But where was he? Would they find him in time to help them fight Islam? PETER JAMES tells the story

BY PRESENT-DAY standards, medieval geographical knowledge was extremely limited. The tiny world of the European Christian was surrounded on every side by the mists of the unknown. Medieval mapmakers filled the Atlantic with romantic images of fairy islands, while factual knowledge of Africa and Asia was negligible – considerably less, in fact, than it had been in Roman times. The barbarian invasions that had ushered in the Dark Ages of Europe had completely broken down the old trade patterns with the East; and the subsequent Arab conquests of the seventh century, which had formed an Islamic empire stretching from southern Spain to the borders of China, effectively isolated Europe from the rest of the old world.

In the absence of first-hand information, to the medieval imagination Africa and Asia merged into an otherworldly 'beyond', filled with mythical places and strange peoples. The East's mysterious reputation, carried over from Roman travellers' tales, flowered into fantastic proportions. Beyond the few familiar countries of the Middle East, medieval mapmakers would mark vague land masses populated by dragons, unicorns and griffins, tribes of human anatomical freaks and even the Earthly Paradise. Christopher Columbus, sailing westwards to reach Asia, fully expected to find there the original Garden of Eden, 'where the golden blossoms burn upon the trees forever'.

Other would-be travellers to the East were inspired by the stories of unknown Christians existing beyond the borders of the Islamic world, but how many there were, and how they lived, were matters for speculation. The luxury goods – such as exotic spices and precious metals – from Africa and Asia that filtered through from Arab traders were better known, but even this tangible evidence of the East conjured up pictures of a fantastic reality. In Europe it was widely believed, for example, that pepper-plants were not sown, but simply appeared through the will of God, and that gold was mined from the earth by dog-sized ants. Beyond the Islamic world, Africa and Asia formed a wonderland as remote to the medieval European as the Moon.

This fascination with the Orient took on new meaning in the 12th century, when the crusaders managed to gain some precarious footholds along the coasts of Syria and Palestine. They were engaged in a life-and-death struggle with a resurgent Islam, now led by the energetic and militaristic Seljuk Turks. Then, as the crusader citadels in the Holy Land braced themselves for a counter-attack, rumours began to circulate about events taking place in the interior of Asia, on the eastern border of the Turkish empire. The most extravagant of all the medieval legends about the East had begun to develop. The story, which eventually proved to have a shadowy basis in fact, concerned the monarch of an unknown kingdom somewhere in the direction of India. 'Prester John', as he was called, was thought to be a Christian potentate, a saintly king of such piety that he held the title of priest (*prester*) rather than emperor. His empire was pictured in terms of unrivalled wealth and such power that it could break the bitter deadlock between Islam and European Christianity.

The first definite news of Prester John was

brought to Europe in 1145 by a Catholic Bishop from the Lebanon, who had come to report a recent disaster in Syria. The crusaders' state of Edessa had just fallen to the Turks, but the Bishop had some more encouraging news to relate. In the words of one medieval chronicle, the Bishop stated that 'a few years ago a certain King and Priest called John, who lives on the further side of Persia and Armenia, in the remote East' had arrived in Iraq with a vast army of Christians and engaged the Turks in battle. After a struggle lasting three days he finally inflicted a crushing defeat on the Turks. The mysterious victor, the Bishop continued, carried a sceptre of solid emerald as a token of his immense wealth, and proclaimed himself as a descendant of the Magi – or wise men – who had worshipped Christ in his cradle. Seeking to emulate his ancestors, Prester John's ambition was to visit Jerusalem and to liberate it from the threat of the Turks. After his victory in Iraq he attempted to move on to the Holy Land, but was blocked by the river Tigris. Having no boats, he – somewhat implausibly – waited patiently during several winters for the river to freeze over, but the weather took a heavy toll on his armies and, the Bishop concluded, Prester John had reluctantly returned home.

There seemed to be no good reason to doubt that Prester John would muster his immense resources and make another attempt to rescue the Holy Land. Europe awaited with growing excitement the return of the saintly monarch from the unknown continent. While he was preparing his forces, perhaps he would try to send some message of hope to his Christian brethren in the West? Sure enough, a series of extraordinary 'letters from Prester John' began to appear in Europe, addressed to the Pope, the Byzantine Emperor Manuel and the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick. The 'facts' revealed by these letters outstripped all previous expectations of Prester John's power and magnificence. Whether the Pope himself accepted the first of these letters, addressed to him in 1165, as the genuine article is difficult to tell, but the letter was taken seriously enough throughout Europe to be translated into six different languages.

The authoritative communications were ostensibly written by Prester John himself – in Latin – and announced in a grandiose manner the king's desire to make himself known in the West: 'We have been told that you would very much like to know about us and our country and our nation and our animals and the nature of our country.' Prester John obliged with a detailed description of his realm. He ruled, he said, over the

Left: the popular medieval image of an all-powerful Prester John, whose secret empire contained the Garden of Eden (bottom, in a painting by Roeland Savory), was peopled by freaks and monsters, and was the home of mythical beasts such as the unicorn and griffin

Left: one Peter the Hermit whips up enthusiasm for the crusades – the attempt by Christian armies to free Jerusalem (below) from the grip of Islam. Prester John was rumoured to have ambitions to liberate the Holy City – and during the crusades of the 12th century all of Christendom waited anxiously for his aid

'three Indias' and had command over 42 other kings, who recognised him as 'the greatest prince in the world'. Within his domains, he claimed, were the ruins of the Tower of Babel, the burial place of St Thomas (who had, he said, converted the Indians to Christianity), Mount Olympus, the fountain of perpetual youth, the Garden of Eden, the land of the Amazons and practically every other marvel of popular medieval belief. In Prester John's land, the letter states, everything was in abundance, no one starved, and it was impossible to be poor: 'Our land streams with honey, and is overflowing with milk.' The king himself had enormous stores of precious stones and spices, to which he invited his fellow kings in Europe to come and help themselves.

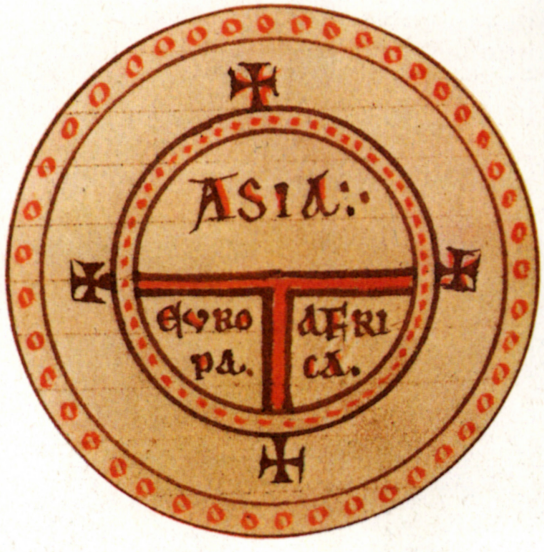
Land of green lions

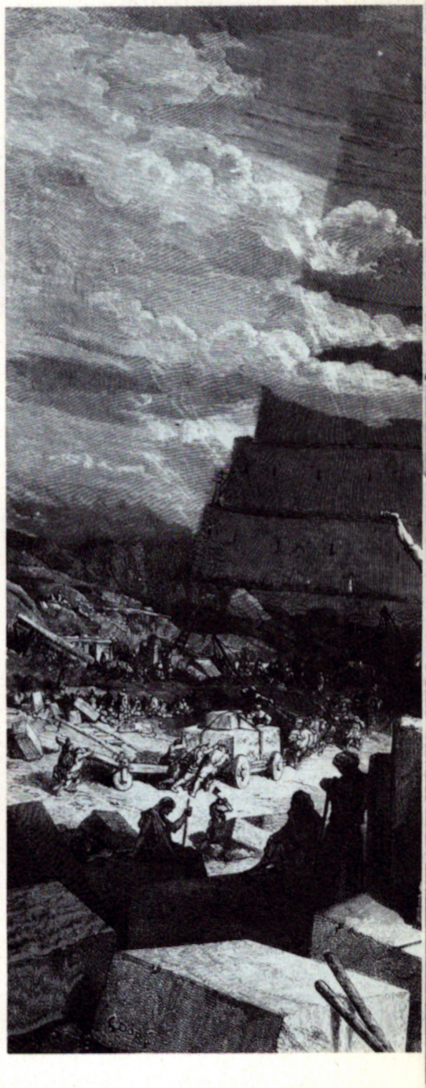
The letters continue with a catalogue of the fauna and flora of Prester John's land that ranges from the mundane to the bizarre. At the believable end of the scale are tigers and camels, but when the letter goes on to describe green lions, and eagles that can carry off horses, the reader has entered the exotic world of the most fantastic medieval bestiaries. The wonders include hares as big as sheep; the immortal phoenix bird; griffins; salamanders that live in fire; a race of 100-foot (30-metre) giants; a tribe of fishermen with dogs' heads; two-horned desert folk with one eye at the front of their heads and two at the back; albino pygmies with knee-length beards who all live to be 200; and centaurs that live in trees.

With amusing detail the letters of Prester John describe the uses to which he put these fabulous freaks. Most useful of all are the voracious cannibals whose stomachs serve as dustbins for the Prester's enemies:

> They regard it as a main duty to munch human flesh. . . . We lead them at our pleasure against our foes, and neither man nor beast is left undevoured, if our Majesty gives the requisite permission. And when all our foes are eaten, then we return with our hosts [armies] home again.

For the time being Prester John keeps the cannibal races, known as Gog and Magog, imprisoned behind a chain of mountains to the far north. The Pope, however, cannot have been delighted to learn Prester John's prophecy that they will break out under the leadership of the Antichrist at the end of the world and consume everyone in Europe, even in 'the great city Rome'.





Among the incredible claims, the letters try to convey some serious intentions. Prester John was concerned that Europe doubted his Christian devotion: 'It is proper for us to let you know so that you should appreciate we are true believers.' More significantly there was the reassurance of military aid against Islam that everyone in Europe wanted to hear: 'And you may know that we have vowed to go and to conquer the land of Israel and Jerusalem; and we shall go there with great glory and a strong army and we shall slay those who hate our faith.'

So many versions of these letters circulated through Europe that it is impossible to pinpoint the original and detect its source. Was it really sent from some oriental monarch trying to give an overblown impression of himself – or was it a forgery, a European idea of how such an omnipotent ruler as Prester John would write? Whatever the case, the 'Prester John letters' had a profound effect, becoming a new genre of medieval literature, even being translated into popular verse and ballad. The image of Prester John took a hold on the European

Medieval knowledge of the world was relatively scanty – as this 12th-century map (above left) clearly shows. Any type of creature could, it was suspected, populate the far reaches of the unknown world; even the exotic goods brought into Europe through trading with the East, such as pepper (left), were believed to grow mysteriously, perhaps spontaneously through the will of God. In this climate of heightened imagination rumours of Prester John flourished

imagination that was to last for another 400 years. The conviction that he existed, and that contact with him was imminent, was so strong that it even helped to shape European strategy and foreign policy.

It may seem to the 20th-century reader that the Europeans of the Middle Ages were incredibly naïve to believe such a hotch-potch of palpable fantasy as the 'letters from Prester John', but the details they contained were not merely fanciful to the medieval mind – rather they described Asia just as they 'knew' it to be. In any case, Pope Alexander III took the claims seriously enough to try to communicate with Prester John. In 1177 he sent Dr Philippus, his private physician, to find Prester John and deliver an urgent letter to him. The Pope explained that he had heard, through Philippus and others travelling in the East, that Prester John 'king of India' desired to be instructed in the true Catholic faith, build a church in Rome and set up an altar in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (then in the shaky grasp of the crusaders). These requests do not appear in the famous 'letters', and it seems that someone had made them in far more sober communications – sadly no longer extant. But there is a note of bitterness in the Pope's letter that suggests that he was also aware of the boastful epistles currently circulating under Prester John's name. Perhaps Pope Alexander was disturbed by the implication that the Prester's tame cannibals, the tribes of Gog and Magog, would one day devour his European flock, or was horrified by the arrogant tone that lacked the respect due to papal authority. Pope Alexander's equally pompous reply ended with the note that the religious 'concessions' requested by the Prester would be made all the more readily 'the less thou vauntest of thy wealth and power'.

Doctor Philippus, as far as we know, dutifully set off on his mission. He was never heard of again, heading a long list of pilgrims and messengers to Prester John, who, wherever they arrived, failed to return home. The disappearance of Philippus closed the first episode in the Prester John saga – after which nothing was heard for many years. Then in 1221 the rumours began afresh. Along with prophecies current in the Middle East that the 600-year dominance of Islam was about to end, came the familiar report that a great Christian conqueror was on the move in the East, sweeping the Muslims before him. Word came that the original Prester John was dead but that his title and passionate hatred of Islam had been inherited by his grandson David. The new Prester John's path of conquest would soon bring him to the gates of Europe to link hands with his European allies.

Above: Pope Alexander III, who received letters allegedly from Prester John, which described his kingdom. Among its legendary wonders, he said, was the Tower of Babel (top left) and the tomb of St Thomas (left)

The saintly Prester John?

In 1222 the expected army did, indeed, arrive in Europe, after trouncing the Turks in central Asia and Persia – but it was not headed by Prester John with his emerald sceptre and retinue of choirs. The rapidly moving force that some Europeans had prepared to welcome with open arms happened to be the Mongolian hordes of Genghis Khan. The wild Tartar horsemen swept into Europe in a flood of destruction and carnage, devastating large areas of Russia, Poland and Hungary. The dreamers of Europe suddenly realised their bitter mistake. The terrible Gog and Magog, rather than the saintly Prester John, had arrived, and the end of the world was feared.

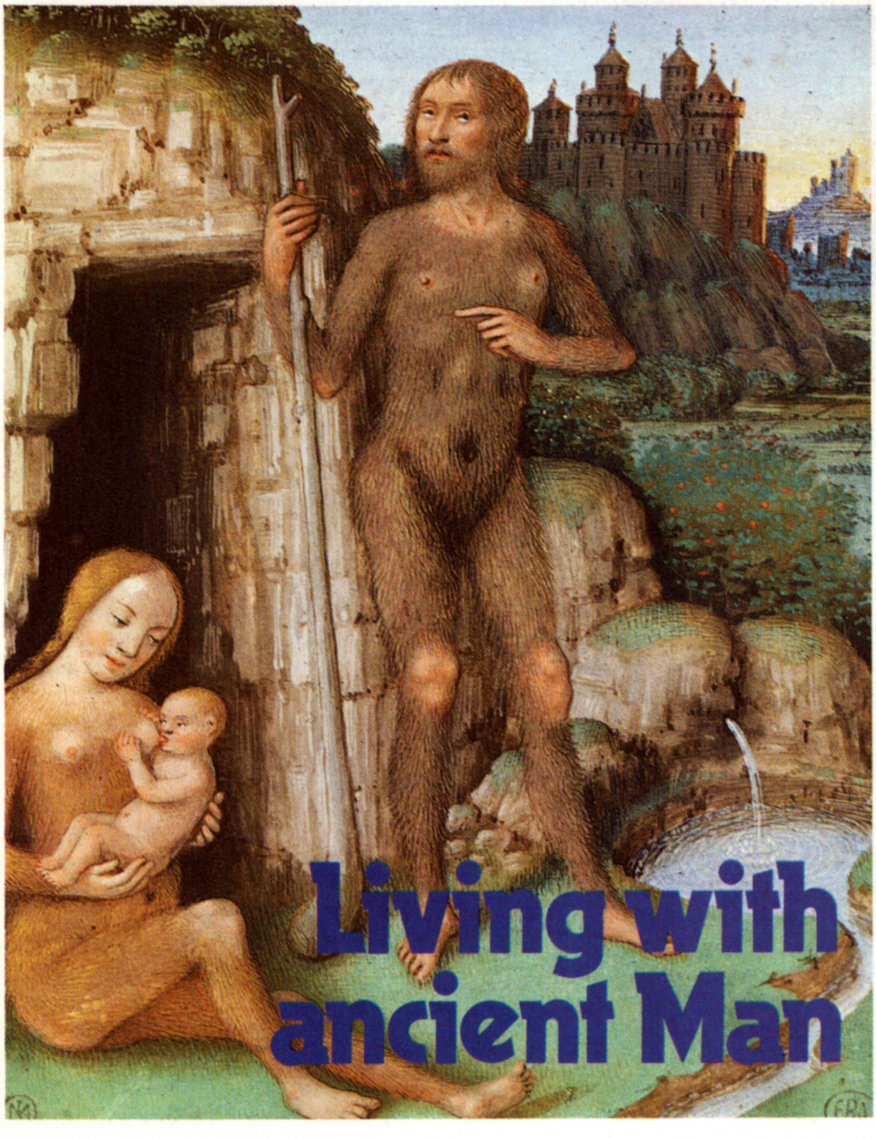
However, with characteristic suddenness the Tartar hordes returned into Asia to settle a dispute in the Mongolian royal dynasty, and after a few more raids Europe was spared further agony. The Mongolian empire quickly settled down into a remarkably stable and well-organised system reaching from the Danube to the Pacific, and peaceful overtures were made to the Christian West. The Mongolian empire, after a few years, proved to be a blessing in disguise to European traders and explorers, who could now travel safely into central Asia along routes policed by Tartar horsemen. Now a few roads to the East were open through the Mongolian empire, the search for Prester John began in earnest. And, eventually, he was found.

Marco Polo claimed to have found Prester John – but had he? See page 2874

Living with ancient Man

The conventional account of Man's evolution says that Neanderthal man died out some 35,000 years ago. And yet persistent reports suggest that he may be alive and well – and living in Asia. PETER JAMES investigates

Below: *The savage state*, from a series of paintings by Jehan Bourdichon (*c.*1457–1521) depicting the four states of Man. This genteel and idealised portrait of primitive Man shows him living in a roughly constructed hovel – in a landscape dotted with magnificent castles. Perhaps the suggestion, made unwittingly by the artist, that primitive Man existed alongside civilised society, is closer to the truth than it seems: reports suggest that a hairy hominid, similar in appearance to Neanderthal man, lives in the remote highlands of Asia



A 12TH-CENTURY Arabic text on the fauna of central Asia describes the Nasnas, 'a creature inhabiting the plains of Turkestan, of erect carriage and vertical stature, with wide, flat nails. . . . This, after mankind, is the highest of the animals.'

This medieval description is just one of hundreds of accounts, ranging from eyewitness reports to legend, from eastern Europe to Siberia and from the seventh century BC to the 1980s, all attesting to the existence of an 'unknown' hominid that survives in the remoter highlands of the Asian landmass. Unlike the often garbled tales of the 'abominable snowman' or Himalayan yeti, or creatures such as the Loch Ness monster, the descriptions of these 'wild men' – 'almas' in many Asian languages – reveal a staggering consistency. The typical account tells of hairy man-like beings native to mountains and woods, who have no spoken language and an extremely low level of technology, if any.

Study of these traditions of an independent and primitive living relative of Man is no longer regarded as a flippancy, although early investigators had great difficulty in raising serious interest in their work. Professor Rinchen, who works at the University of Ulan Bator and is an internationally renowned authority on Mongolian traditions, had to pay out of his own pocket even for the paper used in his extensive recording of Mongolian folklore. But with Rinchen's invaluable pioneering work to hand a group of determined Soviet scholars began, during the 1950s, to break the academic ice on the almas question. The change in attitude was largely engineered by Boris Porshnev, professor of history and philosophy in the USSR Academy of Science, who gave the subject some respectability among the scientific community by publishing an article on the mysterious 'wild men' in the leading US journal *Current Anthropology* shortly before his death in 1974.

One of Porshnev's disciples, Dr Jeanne Kauffman, established a study centre in the Caucasus mountains, an area of such frequent almas sightings that their existence is quite casually accepted by the locals. Since 1962 Kauffman's team has collected dozens of eyewitness accounts, including an extraordinary case in which 30 different people reported seeing a female almas eating corn cobs in a maize field. From reports of local farmers and hunters Kauffman has built up a picture of a local almas. This seems to be very similar to the creature suggested by Rinchen's Mongolian data, although the Caucasian 'wild people' appear a little

Top: the Altai mountains and the Gobi desert in south-west Mongolia. Many witnesses – including these nomads, seen here milking their mares (above) – report having seen hairy, Man-like creatures

Top left: Dr Jeanne Kauffman takes an almas's footprint from a trail found in 1962 in the Caucasus mountains, in southern USSR. Dr Kauffman has set up an almas study centre in the Caucasus – and an analysis of the data she has collected suggests that the Caucasian almas is very similar in appearance to the creature reported in Mongolia

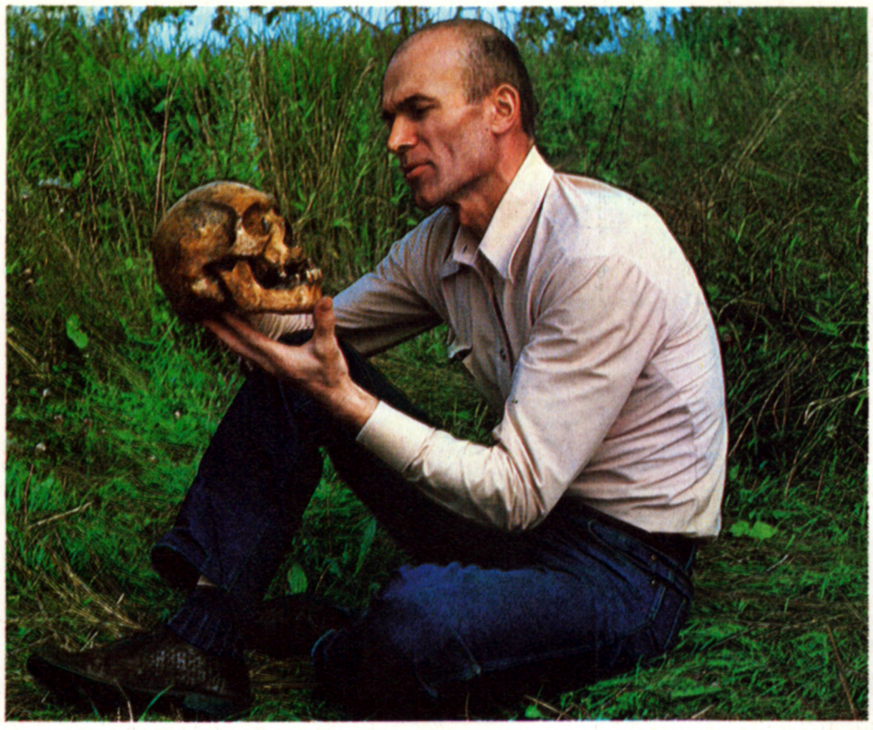
shorter and less hairy. Kauffman's team has also reported the discovery of two almas lairs containing stores of potatoes, fruit and a corn cob showing unmistakably hominid tooth-marks. It also investigated traces left by the female almas in the maize field, including tooth imprints from a jaw slightly wider than that of the average human being, and the clear footprints of a rather bow-legged bipedal hominid.

It is tempting to compare the almas case to the discovery of the snow leopard and mountain gorilla. Once, they, too, were known only through the oral traditions of local eyewitnesses, which were light-heartedly dismissed by scientists as improbable fantasies – until specimens were actually trapped and placed in zoos. Although we still lack an almas specimen, there is already enough consistent evidence to make it seem likely that these Man-like beings do exist – apparently in small and ever decreasing numbers in the mountainous regions of southern and central Asia. But what, or who, are they?

Boris Porshnev proposed that the almas represents a 'relic' population of Neanderthal man. As Neanderthal man was gradually replaced by modern Man, from about 40,000 years ago onwards, it seems reasonable to assume that some of the Neanderthals took refuge in dense forests, deserts and inaccessible mountains. Neanderthal culture, Porshnev argues, would have declined as Neanderthals were cut off from important resources such as flint supplies. Their descendants, living a sad parody of the lives of former Neanderthals, could have given rise to the descriptions of hairy 'wild men of the woods' that occur in so many European folktales, and could even have inspired the satyrs of Greek myth.

Almas and Neanderthal

Several strands of evidence combine to make the Porshnev hypothesis extremely attractive. As well as the eyewitness stories, we are fortunate in having a detailed study of a dead almas conducted by Soviet military surgeons in 1925. Together these sources provide a consistent and vivid picture of the appearance of an almas. It is apparently of medium height and robust build, with no significant anatomical differences from the human body. The head, however, is characteristically different in shape, with bulging brows, sloping forehead, massive lower jaw and snub nose. The whole description matches perfectly with reconstructions of classic Neanderthal man, except that we cannot tell from Neanderthal skeletal remains whether they were covered in reddish-brown hair, as the almas apparently is. Perhaps significant



is the fact that Neanderthal remains, some 35,000 or more years old, have been found at three sites within the present area of almas sightings. Southern Russia and central Asia were therefore known to the Neanderthals, and would have provided logical retreats for the remnant population. In the words of Professor John Napier, a universally respected authority on primate biology, 'the Almas cannot be excluded as relict members of the Neanderthal population of the last glacial period.'

Conservative interest

Porshnev's theory now commands some serious interest even from British archaeologists. In 1982 the eminently respected – and generally notoriously conservative – journal *Antiquity* published a study entitled 'The case for Neanderthal survival' by Dr Myra Shackley, a lecturer in archaeological science at the University of Leicester. After careful assessment of the evidence, and having concluded some field work in Mongolia, Shackley concluded: 'the idea that Neanderthal man *must* be extinct since modern man can be the only surviving hominid species is outmoded biological arrogance.'

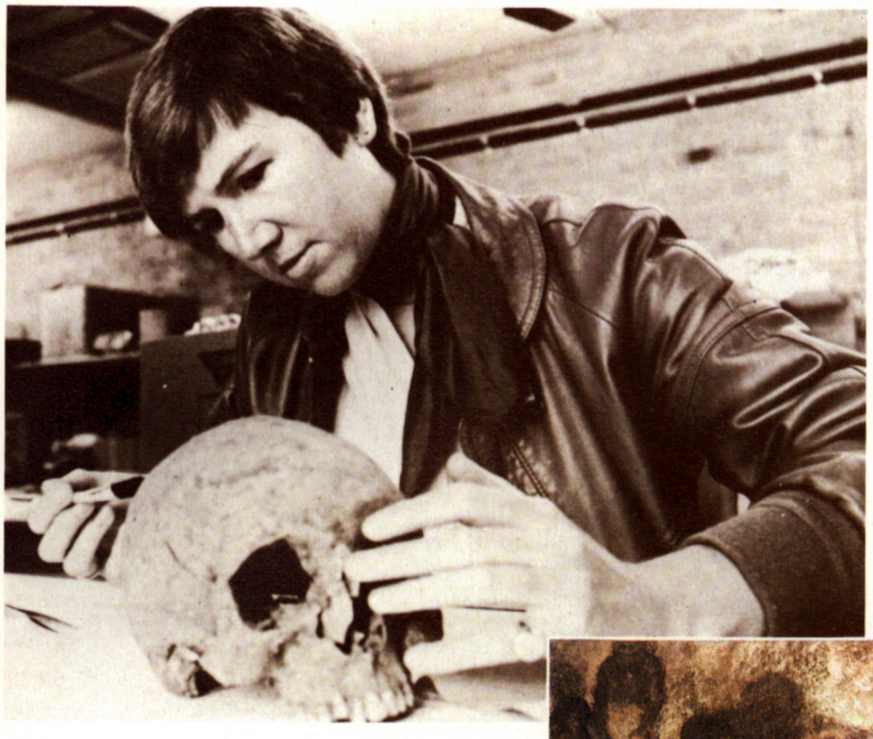
If the Russian scientists continue their intensive search for the almas, it seems reasonable to suppose that it is only a matter of time before a skeleton or living specimen is found to clinch the case. If and when this happens, it will undoubtedly send the world of biological science into a state of turmoil. How will the Darwinian view of the evolution of Man be affected? Such a find would certainly not *disprove* Darwin's theory as it could be argued that remote Neanderthal men could simply have been left behind by the process of 'natural selection' through which mankind evolved. But the continued existence of Neanderthal man, if it were proved, would be the kind of untidy fact that is an embarrassment to the Darwinian picture of a slow succession of hominid species, from *Australopithecus* through *Homo erectus* and Neanderthal man to ourselves.

The conventional theory often gives the impression that these types of 'fossil men' lived at discrete periods of time and can be arranged into neat 'family trees' of descent. But in fact the awkward evidence suggests a very different picture – of almost complete confusion. *Homo erectus*, who supposedly died out a quarter of a million years ago, may still have been alive a few thousand years before Christ (see page 2804). Another side of the problem is the discarded evidence that modern Man lived in the Pliocene period (3.7 to 5.5 million years ago). It was during the Pliocene period that *Australopithecus* is supposed to have evolved and, according to some, separated from the basic ape-stock common to Man and chimpanzee. Yet in the 19th and early 20th centuries a number of discoveries were made of *Homo sapiens* *sapiens* remains, sometimes whole skeletons, in deposits dating from the Pliocene period, notably at Castenodolo in Italy, Calaveras in California and Foxhall in Suffolk. Another half a dozen fully human fragments were found in Europe in strata dating from the Pleistocene period, which immediately followed the Pliocene period – and which are, again, contemporary with the *Australopithecus*. The finds were the subjects of furious controversy. They were simply impossible to fit into the Darwinian scheme of things, and were denounced as 'intrusive', burials from much later periods – despite the protests of the excavators that the locations in which they were found were undisturbed.

By the 1950s, the Pliocene fossil-men had

Top: Igor Bourtsev, an almas researcher from the Caucasus, holding what is, according to local people, the skull of the son of a human huntsman and an almas called Zanah

Above: an excavation carried out in Ipswich, Suffolk, England, in 1912, in which modern human remains were found – buried under ancient soil strata. Dating remains by strata can lead to distorted estimates of their age



Above left: Dr Myra Shackley, an archaeologist who, having carefully studied the evidence for the almas, is convinced of its existence. Her composite picture of the almas (above), put together from a number of eyewitness accounts, closely resembles reconstructions of Neanderthal men (left) made on the basis of fossil finds. Could it be that Neanderthal man has survived into the modern world – as the almas?

been 'argued away'. Eventually one or two were dated by the radiocarbon method – which showed them apparently to be thousands, rather than millions, of years old. But an air of uncertainty always remained. Sir Arthur Keith, in his day the foremost British authority on fossil man, was the last eminent scholar to treat the finds with any real seriousness. In 1925 he made a statement about the rejection of the problematic finds:

> Our predecessors were largely influenced by prejudice. . . . The story of the Calaveras skull, although grown stale . . . cannot be passed over. it is the 'bogey' which haunts the students of early man. . . .

Keith himself found the authenticity of the discoveries impossible to believe, and remarked that to accept them would be rather like accepting the validity of finding an aeroplane in a church vault that had been bricked up since Elizabethan times. Yet he concluded, with refreshing honesty:

> Indeed, were such discoveries in accordance with our expectations, if they were in harmony with the theories which we have regarding the date of man's evolution, no one would ever dream of doubting them. . . .

Whatever the truth, it would seem that the casebook of Pliocene men is now closed, though it should be noted that the early radiocarbon tests performed on some of the material are next to useless – fossilised bone cannot be dated accurately in this way.

As a science palaeoanthropology, the study of Man's fossil remains, has an unfortunate track record of blunders, fraudulence and misinterpretation. Despite major improvements in method and – it is to be hoped – the honesty and judgement of the scientists involved, reliable data from which to build a realistic picture of Man's origins are still extremely scarce. New theories and definitive statements based on miserably patchy evidence are continually bandied about, and there is still an unmistakable predisposition among Darwinian scientists to mould the evidence in favour of accepted theories. The fundamental question of 'where do we come from?' has brought out some of the worst aspects of modern scientific research. Until we have a new generation of palaeoanthropologists, and a new way of thinking about the origins of Man, any thinking about the mechanics of human evolution will have to remain largely in the realms of speculation.

Further reading

Malcolm Bowden, *Ape men – fact or fallacy?*, Sovereign 1977
Francis Hitching, *The neck of the giraffe*, Pan 1982
John Reader, *The missing links*, Collins 1981

Surgeon from the other side

A personal tragedy triggered Isa Northage's extraordinary psychic abilities, which began with clairvoyance and ended with materialisations of a dead surgeon who performed operations on the living. ROY STEMMAN charts the development of this gifted medium

IN 1916 A YOUNG WOMAN named Isa Phillips was eagerly planning her wedding day. Her fiancé Kit was on active service overseas. In a vivid and horrifying vision Isa saw her husband-to-be shot and fall from his horse; a few days later she received news of his death.

A friend brought Kit's personal belongings to Isa. He described how Kit had died, and confirmed Isa's psychic vision in every detail. Isa had also seen this man, Jack Northage, in her vision – he had gone to Kit's assistance – and he had a large part to play in Isa's future. They became friends, and were eventually married in 1919.

After this first experience of her psychic powers Isa began to hear a man's voice, which guided her when she was in danger. She also began to develop clairvoyant powers.

After the war Isa formed a small orchestra, which flourished for a time. Then she began 'seeing' faces and people in front of the music stand while she was playing. The 'spirits' indicated that they wanted to speak to her and give her tunes that had a special meaning for their loved ones.

Above: the medium Isa A. Northage. When Isa's spirit guide advised her to concentrate on healing, she started a sanctuary at Pinewoods, in the beautiful grounds of Newstead Abbey, Nottinghamshire (below)

Eventually, the medium abandoned her musical career and devoted herself to passing on these communications from the dead to the living at Spiritualist churches and public meetings. In this early stage of her career, in the late 1930s, Isa was known as the 'concertina medium' because during seances she would often receive a psychic impression of a song or tune and would play it on her concertina, at the same time describing the spirit person she could see clairvoyantly. She was often able to give the name and personal details of the spirit person and a message of comfort to the grieving relatives and friends.

Isa Northage became in great demand as a medium, particularly when it was known that her psychic powers included producing physical phenomena. The first public manifestation of this occurred in April 1937 at a meeting held in a well-lit hall in Matlock, Derbyshire. While Isa was speaking to the audience, some flowers in a vase on a table near her slowly lifted themselves out of the vase and floated above the heads of the assembled company. Then, as an encore, the table carrying the now empty vase rose off the ground. Isa later confessed herself astonished at this phenomenon.

In the early days of her physical mediumship Isa used a light aluminium trumpet, with a broad luminous band painted around the end of the bell to make it visible in the dark; this served as a megaphone in direct voice mediumship to amplify the voices of the spirits. She had three principal spirit assistants. The first was Chedioack, a West African Negro, affectionately known to the sitters as Sambo. He had died after a bout of fever at the age of 19; he appointed himself Isa's spiritual bodyguard to protect her while she was in a state of trance. Ellen Dawes, an English girl who also died aged 19, acted as a helper and also communicated regularly with her mother. The third member of the spirit team was a Dr Reynolds, who had practised medicine 150 years earlier; it was his voice that had guided Isa at the start of her mediumship.

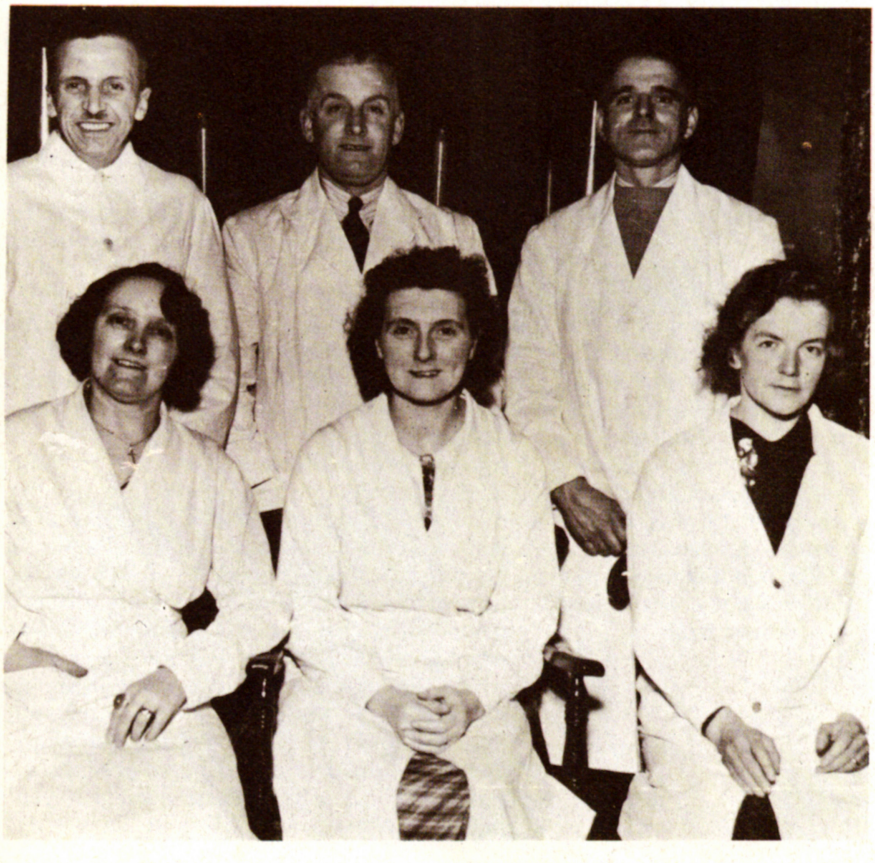
During a seance, Chedioack, one of Isa Northage's spirit helpers, manifested himself for 20 minutes in full light, giving one of the sitters, a Mr Ives, an opportunity to make a sketch of him (above)

A kiss from beyond

In July 1939 the weekly Spiritualist newspaper *Two Worlds* carried an account of one of Mrs Northage's home sittings: a parrot materialised, flew around the darkened room and perched on a sitter's shoulder. Recognisable voices spoke through the trumpet, and there was also a full form materialisation – the wife of one of the sitters. She was clearly seen and heard; and her husband kissed her on the forehead before she returned to the curtained 'cabinet'.

Isa's powers increased dramatically during the next 18 months. At a seance in a private house in Doncaster the 10 sitters saw 19 materialised forms and also spoke to other spirits through the three trumpets that were in use.

Below: Isa Northage (centre) with some of her healers at the Pinewoods sanctuary



At the seances, each spirit form emerged from the medium's cabinet, then picked up a luminous plaque and held it close to its features so that it could be recognised. Occasionally a spirit would pick up a red torch so that the sitters could see it more clearly.

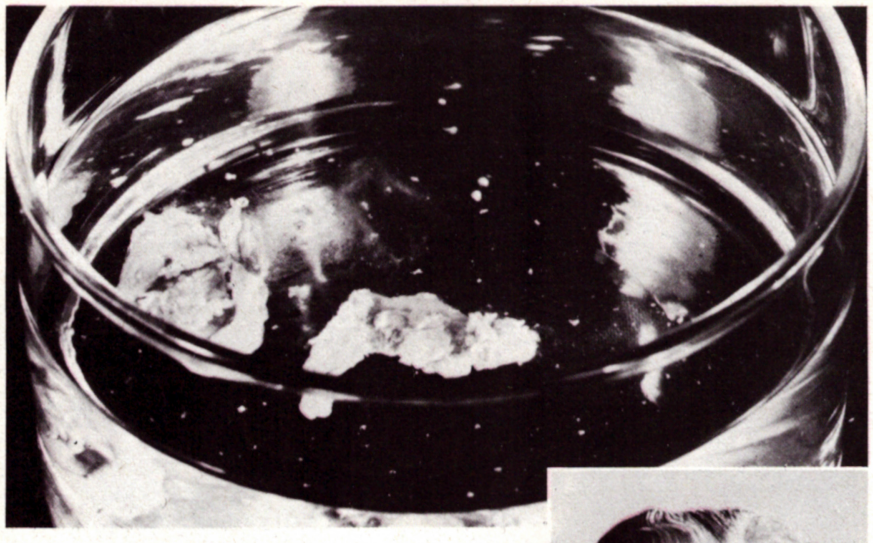
At one seance, reported in *Two Worlds* on 15 December 1939, Sambo asked a sitter to place her hands on the medium's knees. 'While she was still holding them,' the report continued, 'a spirit person materialised, left the cabinet, and walked across the circle to speak to and embrace her mother.' This seemed to the observer to be 'definite evidence that the medium was in her chair', although it was not made clear whether the medium was inside or outside the cabinet.

As Isa's mediumship grew stronger, more and more forms appeared at each sitting, and the materialisations appeared more convincing. One sitter at a seance in Ashington, Northumbria, said in an account published in February 1941:

> My wife and daughter materialised, and both of them talked to me, kissed me, and caressed me. They brought a flower from the cabinet and handed it to me. Then my brother came and spoke to us through the trumpet. I suggested that it was a pity we had not a violin with us, as he was a skilled violinist. He said, 'Bring one tomorrow night and I will play it for you.' We borrowed one, and on the following evening he picked up the violin from outside the cabinet and asked us to sing 'Auld Lang Syne' while he played.

This seems to suggest that the spirits of the wife and daughter were seen simultaneously.

Some details about the conditions under which Isa worked were given in August the same year by G. W. Marshall, a journalist on the *Grimsby Advertiser*. A corner of a room in a private house was partitioned off by a thin



curtain to make a cabinet. The sitters took their seats in a circle, and the lights were turned off. The medium entered the room and made her way to the cabinet, using a dim red light to find her way. When she had taken her seat, this light was also turned off. The reporter was allowed to examine the room both before and after the seance, which lasted two and three quarter hours, and produced both direct voice and materialisation phenomena. 'I shall never forget that experience as long as I live,' said Marshall.

Another sitter at this seance was A. F. Cutforth, vice-president of Louth Spiritualist church, who testified that the materialised forms came from the cabinet and walked around among the sitters, after which 'most of them dematerialised through the floor in front of us, often talking until they were only an inch or two above the floor.' He also reported that two trumpets were levitated:

> While one spirit was holding a conversation through the trumpet at one side of the room, a fully materialised form was conversing with friends and relations on the other side. Mothers, sons, husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, children and guides appeared as solid forms, and able to shake hands with us and exchange kisses.

At a seance in Skegness in April 1941 a dead sailor appeared to his mother from a 'bubbling mass of ectoplasm'. The spirit was 'smiling and full of life' and held long, excited conversations with his brothers, sister, grandmother and parents. 'Then he stood in the middle of the circle and melted slowly away. He did not go to the cabinet, but dissolved before our eyes.'

After 1941 Isa's career entered a new phase. Her guide, Dr Reynolds, told her to abandon public seances and concentrate on healing. She established a seance room, healing clinic and operating theatre in the grounds of her bungalow at Pinewoods, Nottinghamshire. The operating theatre was for dead doctors, such as Dr Reynolds, to carry out 'psychic operations'.

Above: Ernest Thompson, editor of the Spiritualist newspaper *Two Worlds*, attended one of the psychic surgery sessions at Pinewoods in 1949, and was deeply impressed by it. He witnessed the removal of an acute duodenal ulcer (top) by the materialised form of Dr Reynolds, and afterwards had some of the diseased tissue analysed. The tests showed that it was, indeed, part of a duodenal ulcer – which, had it remained in the sufferer's body, would soon have proved fatal

Ernest Thompson, editor of *Two Worlds*, witnessed psychic surgery there on 21 May 1949. Eight people, including Isa Northage, gathered in the operating theatre in the wooden building in Isa's garden. The door was locked, the light turned out, and the meeting started with prayer. Isa was in her cabinet, in a trance; soon a trumpet rose into the air, and the sitters were addressed by the spirit helper, Ellen Dawes. Dr Reynolds's materialised form then appeared, discernible as a 'black silhouette against the red glow from the lamp on a trolley, on which were laid forceps, two red electric torches, one white electric torch and two luminous plaques.'

Operation success

Dr Reynolds picked up a torch, switched it on, and turned towards the operating table 'on which lay a patient suffering from an acute duodenal ulcer.' Two of the witnesses were not wearing masks, and the doctor asked them to put them on before he began operating. He then placed cotton wool swabs on the patient's abdomen and assured him that there would be no pain. No anaesthetic was used. Dr Reynolds explained how

> he would 'freeze' the portion of the body to be operated upon and then pass his hand, which would become dematerialised, into the side of the body and remove the ulcer. His hands moved to the side of the body and as he did so he asked the patient if he felt any pain.

The patient apparently replied that he did not. Then 'a gurgling sound' was heard, and Dr Reynolds reported that 'the ulcer was in a very bad condition and would not come away in a whole piece and that he was afraid of haemorrhage.' This difficulty was overcome, and 'portions of ulcer brought through what Dr Reynolds described as a temporary opening in the abdomen, and placed on the swabs on the surface of the body.'

When the seance ended Thompson retrieved the human tissue from the swabs and put it in a bottle of surgical spirit. A few days later he arranged to have it analysed, and the verdict was: 'It is an acute duodenal ulcer, contains Brunner's glands and shows from its condition that it was about to penetrate the intestine and would have proved fatal.'

Stories like this continued to appear in the psychic press throughout the 1950s. After Isa was involved in a car crash, however, her materialisations and psychic surgery ceased. But she continued to help the sick. In August 1967 the *Scottish Sunday Express* described how a bus driver suffering from a stomach ulcer visited Pinewoods. Before the astonished witnesses, Isa massaged his abdomen, which 'opened like a rose' and the ulcer was plucked out in two pieces. The patient told the newspaper: 'Before the operation almost anything I ate gave me pain. An hour after, I was able to eat a five-course meal. I haven't had a twinge since.'

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ground, that had evidently been forced up at high pressure from the level of the topmost seam. When the water had subsided they clambered down the hole it had made and found themselves in the topmost gallery, still sealed at both ends save for the opening through which the water had gushed to flood the seam. All around floated the dead bodies of the 20 men who had been on Goertal's crew. In all 360 miners had now died in the disaster.

Three more days passed while conditions were made safe for further investigation. Then, a week after the first explosion, the rescue team found Jan Goertal lying on a ledge with two broken legs and a torn scalp, but completely dry – and 327 feet (100 metres) up from where he should have been.

Geologists told the enquiry that the shaft where he had been found was completely sealed off from the shaft where he had been left by his men before the explosion occurred. The only communication between them was by means of the lift shaft, and this had been partially blocked by rubble. The water had not penetrated this lower level, so suggestions that Goertal had been carried up by air and water pressure through mining bore-holes were dismissed as hydraulically impossible. Besides, the force required to lift his body over 300 feet (90 metres) was calculated to be far more than would be needed to smash him to a pulp: 'Many dead men,' said a scientist 'were flattened and crushed by the water alone.'

When, in the autumn of 1908, the main shaft of the pit was dug out, evidence was found to vindicate the geologists' theories. The lower shaft, in which Goertal had originally been trapped, was bone dry – and still sealed by fallen rock and coal dust. No other possible exit hole was discovered.

Somehow, in a manner that defies science, the injured miner had been bodily transported, through the stagnant water in which his dead comrades lay, to safety on a dry shelf in the top gallery. Furthermore, he had existed for seven days, despite his weakened condition, without food or drinkable water.

Goertal never went down the pit again. Instead he and his 18-year-old wife Lisa went to work as farmers on the Alsace border. A staunch Roman Catholic, Goertal told the enquiry that prayer had sustained him. He reported how after the first blast blew him over he lost consciousness for a time, then came to in darkness. When he explored his surroundings he found still water with an unbroken miner's lamp floating in it. He had managed to strike a light from pieces of dry stone and had lit the paraffin-soaked wick. Then he had thought of Lisa and prayed until the rescuers arrived.

In answer to official demands for further explanations, Goertal's only, often repeated, reply was: '*Es muss Gott gewesen sein*' – 'It must have been God.'

The memorial, built in 1911, to the men who died in the Radbod mining disaster. The statue represents the grieving womenfolk who lost their husbands, sons and brothers in the tragedy. In all 360 men died – but Jan Goertal survived, because, he claimed, of an act of God

'It must have been God'

When disaster struck the Radbod coal mine in Germany in 1908, the odds were stacked against mineworker Jan Goertal surviving. Yet, he did. FRANK SMYTH **tells the tale**

On 11 November 1908 a triple explosion, followed by a series of smaller blasts, shook the Radbod coal mine in the Ruhr valley, Germany. Working alone in the lowest seam, 3171 feet (967 metres) below ground, was a 40-year-old Polish mine-ganger, Jan Goertal. Two hours previously, he had sent the rest of his 20-man shift by way of the cage in the main shaft to a higher gallery, 327 feet (100 metres) above, to help clear a routine rock fall. When Goertal heard the first muffled rumble he was standing by the lift gates at the foot of the shaft, waiting for the cage to come down and carry him up to join his men.

Goertal was an experienced miner who had worked in the gold fields of South Africa as well as in coal mines in South America, Poland, France and Germany. He knew instantly what had caused the ominous thunder and to avoid the blast he knew was inevitable he crouched by the gallery wall, bracing himself against the imminent shock waves. The first giant gust of burning air threw his head back against the rock, splitting open his scalp and shattering his miner's lamp.

As was revealed at the enquiry, held at Essen a month later, the boom heard by Goertal had been the sound of the first massive explosion that had swept along the layered galleries of the 80-year-old mine burning 100 men to death in the first few minutes. Another 90 died when poisonous gases rolled along the darkened passageways asphyxiating miners whose nostrils were already choked with dust. And the tragedy did not stop there. As rescuers were lowered down the main shaft on the day after the explosions, pit props in the undamaged galleries splintered and broke, bringing down tonnes of rock and killing most of the remaining workers beneath them.

Only two coal-bound tubes of life remained: one containing most of Goertal's shift – who may, the enquiry decided, have inadvertently struck the fatal spark that started the explosions; and the other holding Goertal himself, alone in the pitch dark.

Later investigation showed that both tunnels had been completely sealed; the top one, 2844 feet (867 metres) from the surface, by cave-ins at both ends, which had left a short stretch of tunnel undamaged but had entombed Goertal's workers; and the other, 327 feet (100 metres) below, in which the ganger lay near to the piles of rubble that had blocked the main lift shaft – the only exit in Goertal's tunnel.

On the morning of the fourth day, dust and spray started erupting from a hole that appeared in the ground above the mine. When rescuers investigated, they found water, apparently coming from a reservoir deep under the

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The Radbod mine in 1908, scene of the disaster and of Jan Goertal's seemingly miraculous escape